KALASHA ORAL LITERATURE AND PRAISE SONGS

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In this paper I summarize some of the main results of my current research on Kalasha oral literature, based upon material collected since 1972. My interest in this field is both archival and theoretical: to document what I believe is an unusually rich indigenous culture of verbal arts; and to use this material to examine processes in the transmission, elaboration and reception of traditional knowledge in a predominantly non-literate society.

Kalasha oral literature comprises a wide range of different genres or speech styles, which correspond with different social contexts of verbal expression. Following Kalasha terms (Handout I), we can make a broad distinction between prose narratives or 'stories' (kisã), on the one hand, and 'songs' (grhu) on the other. This distinction between prose and verse is particularly important, since Kalasha prose narratives are not normally recited on public occasions: they provide what one might call a 'backstage' stock of knowledge, told in relatively private contexts, which is drawn upon for the more formal composition of songs and recitative speech. Compared with many societies where storytelling is a more public event, Kalasha prose stories seem relatively unstructured and flexible in form and content. And unlike what we know of their Afghan Kafir neighbours in the 19th century, the Kalasha appear to have no indigenous prose literature that might be called 'myth' - although, admittedly, some traditional experts, like Kazi Khosh Nawaz in Rumbur, are now quite adept at cobbling together their extensive historical knowledge into the guise of a Kalasha 'mythology' for foreign consumption (see Parkes 1991)!

Prose narratives or kisã are comprised of two main types of story. Most important are historical traditions or legends

that the Kalasha call wasiāt: these we may translate as 'testaments' or 'stories of advice' from elders (for the Kalasha conflate here the Persian-Arabic loanwords wasiāt and nasiāt), consisting of lineage legends that recount all the famous activities of patrilines (kam) of ancestors, over seven or more generations, down to living elders. Secondly, there are what the Kalasha call acōrik, which we may translate as 'fables' or 'nursery tales': typically wonder tales about kings and princesses, or Aesopian animal fables told by mothers to their children. These fables are of great comparative interest, for it is in this genre that the Kalasha absorb much of the prose literature of their neighbours: not only common Persian and Indian folktales, but also, intriguingly, some of the mythology of their Afghan Kafir neighbours.* Yet such stories are clearly marked as nonserious fables, typically with the use of a special verbal tense for hearsay narrative that Morgenstierne termed a 'second, narrative preterite' (1973: 230-31). Despite the significance of such fables in the shaping of Kalasha knowledge, which I have treated elsewhere (Parkes n.d.), I shall only be concerned with the more serious wasiāt traditions about lineage ancestors in this paper, since these provide the essential contextual background for understanding Kalasha praise songs.

Before moving to these songs, I should point out that between pure prose and verse lies an intermediary genre of what might be called recitative speech, consisting of oratory (ištikek) and prayer (suāl). Panegyric oratory is in many respects more closely related to the praise songs I shall be treating than these are related to other types of Kalasha song. For oratory similarly consists of regular phrases (khondi mun) of speech, usually between five or ten words, interspersed with shouts of praise (šabāš! šehe!) from others, enunciated in a quasi-musical prosody that moves from high to low pitch. Yet oratorical speech closely follows the narrative structure of

wasiãt legends, typically reciting the famous deeds of a patriline of ancestors, generation by generation down to living elders, so that they may last up to twenty minutes. Praise songs, particularly those of spontaneous composition (nom-nomek qrhu), might therefore be characterized as abbreviated versions of oratory, subject to more stringent metrical rules; while oratory is itself a more formalized and abbreviated verbal expression of wasiãt legends. But we should recognize that oratory and song are also contextually distinct modes of panegyric expression, contrastively marked by the absence or presence of drumming and dancing as their accompaniment, and they frequently alternate as performative genres at funerals and feasts. Legend, oratory and song also have separate, but functionally interdependent, roles in the organization and transmission of Kalasha historical knowledge.

Turning now to Kalasha songs, we can see that these may be classed according to their thematic content: where the Kalasha distinguish 'praise songs' (namusi qrhu), for example, from 'love songs' (ašeki qrhu) and 'lullabies' (išpadek qrhu); or according to their appropriate festal season (Chaomos songs, Joshi songs, funeral songs, and so on). But cutting across these thematic varieties is a more pertinent distinction of three basic types of song recitation corresponding to three associated modes of dancing on festal occasions: those of drazailak, dušak and ca. These three modes of song-and-dance regularly alternate as successive 'rounds' (rãu) at Kalasha festal performances, accompanied by distinct styles of drumming and dancing. As I concentrate on the drazailak mode of song recitation here, I will describe the other two types rather cursorily; but I should emphasize that these three modes - drazailak, dušak and ca - are primarily distinguished by their relative emphasis upon song text as against accompanying dancing:

a) Firstly, the drazailak mode of singing, which may be translated as 'stretched' or 'prolonged' recitation, is the most textually focussed and elaborate style. It typically consists of ten or more lines of verse, sung according to a regular 17-syllabic metre in a prolonged two-tonal chant, which requires a breath pause or caesura after the seventh syllable. After repeated solo recitation by a singer, allowing his or her audience to memorise the verse, this is taken up by male and female singers in an intentionally staggered 'heterophonic' chorus, followed by dancing to the accompaniment of slow drumming, where the song is again collectively repeated by dancers. The accompanying dance (drazailak nat) is a stately procession of long chains or 'lines' (tren, ša grāvak) of men and women linked shoulder to shoulder, shuffling in slow side-step in a counter-clockwise direction around central drummers and singers at the dancing place. The emphasis is thus upon collective recitation of the singer's verse rather than upon virtuosity in dancing.

b) The second, dušak mode is an abbreviated and faster paced rendition of singing, following a similar melodic contour to the drazailak mode but more loosely structured metrically. Most songs in this mode are of traditional rather than original composition, although it may be used for brief or 'token' panegyric. Unlike drazailak singing, however, dancing begins at the same time as solo recitation, and dancers sing quite separate verses (usually traditional refrains of one or two lines), so that a composed song will only be heard by a small circle of elders surrounding the central singer. For the majority of people, the song therefore provides an appropriate context for dancing rather than being a focal object of listening. Dancing in the dušak mode is also a more vigorous performance, accompanied by a faster tempo of drumming: it consists of short chains of four to eight people, sfuffling sideways at a quick pace for eight or nine steps before sharply retreating to the edge of the dancing place in order to stampede forward and collide into another chain of dancers with the excited shout adusia! ha! ha! ha! 'we confront, ha! ha!". Kicking up clouds of dust, the dance movements supposedly represent the clashing of wild goats in the mountains.

c) Finally, the ca or 'clapping' mode of song-and-dance has minimal emphasis upon song composition and maximal emphasis upon virtuosity in dancing. Ça songs are invariably of traditional rather than individual compositions: usually short refrains of just one or two lines, frequently in praise of spirits rather than humans, although this mode includes some elaborate traditional lyrics such as the Daginai and Luli songs of the Joshi spring festival (Morgenstierne 1973: 50-65). Lines of verse are here repeatedly taken up in turn by a circle of male singers, clapping in time to a fast tempo of drumming, while others are dancing. In the ca nat dance, partners of either sex form groups of three or four, which

pivot like a wheel three times in either direction before leaping off in a counter-clockwise direction to begin pivoting on new site. As the pace fastens, individuals disengage to demonstrate their virtuosity in dance: women sedately twirl with elaborate hand gestures (bāzum kai), similar to Chitrali dancing, while men perform more vigorous hops and leaps, whistling with their fingers and brandishing sticks or dancing axes (brešteu), reminiscent of the warrior dances of the Afghan Kafirs described by Robertson (1896: 617-22, 627).

In the context of these three song-and-dance modes, I want to emphasize that the drazailak style is distinguished by its emphasis upon individual song composition, and the collective memorization of newly composed verse by a communal audience. Indeed, newly composed songs in this mode will be repeated three or more times, so that its whole performance may last up to an hour. We may also note that these three modes, which ideally alternate as a sequence, are organized to provide both aesthetic variety and to provide distinct opportunities for both individual and collective performances: all men and women may sing while dancing; all senior men have a chance to contribute a line to the ca mode; individuals may compose brief songs for a small audience of elders in the dušak mode; and they may have their songs collectively memorised in the drazailak mode. The latter therefore foregrounds song composition as its central performance, and it is designed permanently to instill such compositions in collective memory.

Composition

So how does one compose praise songs in the drazailak mode? As I have indicated, these songs follow quite precise metrical rules of syllabic length and stress for singing (see Handout III). Yet unlike many other societies with comparable panegyric verse, the Kalasha have no truly professionalised class of praise singers; drazailak songs should in fact be recited by all senior men or 'elders' invited to a feast or festival in public recognition of their hosts. A large proportion of adult Kalasha have therefore learned an implicit

'grammar' or formulaic 'tool-kit' for the composition of such songs, which I now briefly outline.

Let us suppose that one is a senior clan elder (kam gaderak) who has been invited to the feast or funeral of some other clan elder, for whom one should compose a praise song. First one must know some noteworthy deeds in the life of one's host, and of his lineal ancestors, that will provide a sufficiently glorious theme for the song. These one might pick up from oratorical speeches at the festival itself; but to compose a good song in advance one probably needs to consult some expert on the waisāt legends of the man's lineage ancestors: someone like Kazi Khosh Nawaz in Rumbur, for example. One does not need to know or memorize such legends oneself; one merely needs allusions to some memorable deeds of the man's ancestors that will recall such legends to other listeners, ideally suggesting some thematic continuity with the life of the man to be praised.

There are two primary themes of praise or renown (namus) appropriate as topics of panegyric: those concerning the prosperity of a man, such as his successful management of a large household, together with his wealth in goats or land; and his personal achievements or prowess as an elder. These attributes, often trivial in real life, are poetically heightened by the use of an extensive repertoire of traditional epithets for renown (of which examples are illustrated in Songs A and B of my handout). The patriarch of a large extended household, for example, may be referred to as a 'king bee' (macherik ša) commanding a prosperous 'beehive' (macherik mru) of married sons, or as the main 'roofbeam' (baš) supporting his house. His property, particularly if he and his ancestors have given feasts in the past, will be referred to as 'ancient wealth' (bāluš dewalāt), or as a 'gold and silver treasure' (rua ze sura khazinā) poured out in feasting (see Song A, line 2, Song B, line 4). His goats, if

he is a major herdowner, are invariably 'cross-horned' (krumbrea) or 'sacred' (ōjišta), connoting some special relationship with the spiritual world (see Song B, lines 6-8

As one can see from the examples in my handout, such epithets are elements of recurrent phrases, which form the traditional building blocks from which Kalasha praise songs are constructed. They are, indeed, typical 'formulas' or 'formulaic expressions': characteristic features of oral composition, as exemplified in the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord (1960) on South Slavic oral epics. Our Kalasha song composer can therefore draw upon substantial chunks of metrically appropriate verse. Opening lines, for example, tend to be narrowly stereotyped: an exclamation of 'Bravo!' (šabāš), followed by the lineage name of the elder (descendant or grandson of so-and-so) and one's kinship relationship with him (cf. Song A, line 1, Song B, line 1); and closing lines are equally regular, serving to alert one's audience that the song may now be repeated as a chorus: they end typically with expressions of modesty in attempting to convey sufficient praise (e.g. Song A, line 4), or, for example, that to recount fully all the deeds of an elder would be like 'a water channel that never comes to an end' (driga zai uk, nāsi ne drašniu). There are also regular opening formulas for other lines of verse, particular those of time (e.g. 'the month of spring emerged...' Song A, line 2)) or of place, typically crossing over named mountain passes (Song B, lines 7-8). Neighbouring peoples or places are also alluded to with regular epithets Chitralis, for example, are inevitably a 'white butterfly army' (presumably from their spotless clothing!), and Chitral itself is typically a 'golden bazaar' (see IV, lines 14 and 11).

Such formulaic phrases therefore provide a substantial scaffolding for the construction of praise songs. Yet a successful or memorable composition obviously cannot be built

upon formulas alone. In fact, their main use is to provide a metrically tailored cadence or final section of each verse, for regular singing in the drazailak mode (Handout III).

Creativity

The two brief songs I have so far used to illustrate formulaic composition are certainly not masterpieces of Kalasha oral literature: they are somewhat mechanical compositions, heavily dependent upon stock praise formulas, which is why they serve as useful examples. Both were composed by visiting elders from Bomboret, attending the Joshi spring festival in Rumbur 1976, and they were obviously intended to be no more than token gestures of praise for their Rumbur hosts. The first song (A), for example, merely names two major lineage groups in Rumbur, praising the beauty of their women at the dancing place, who appear like a 'silver treasure' in the singer's eyes. The second song (B) is more detailed: it names specific individuals, the sons of Sherbek in the Balore-nawau lineage of Kalashagrom, commemorating the wealth they amassed and the great mortuary feast given on the death of Sherbek, which is likened to a 'swarming of bees'. Reference to their herding prowess in the pastures in the last three lines also alludes to wasiāt legends about this family's special relationship with the suci spirits of the mountains.

Even in the simplest praise songs, therefore, we note the use of allusion to wasiāt legends, as well as echoes of other songs, which imply a reliance upon extensive shared knowledge with one's audience to make otherwise oblique formulaic expressions personally meaningful. The significance of this shared background knowledge has, I believe, been neglected by many scholars who see formulaic language as an arthritic paralysis of meaning, even as an ideological reinforcement of 'traditional authority' in non-literate societies through its apparent constraints upon possibilities of public expression (e.g. Bloch 1974). I would rather argue that the very

ambiguity of meaning inherent in formulaic expression actively encourages an audience to search for personal 'implications' in such verse with reference to shared, traditional knowledge.

To suggest the nature of this shared knowledge, I shall take as my final example a more elaborate form of Kalasha praise poetry: the song of Buda (reproduced overleaf on my handout), which represents a more skillful type of Kalasha panagyric, one likely to be preserved in collective memory and to be repeated in subsequent generations. To begin with, one needs to know that Buda, aged over seventy years in 1976 when I recorded his song, is one of the seniormost elders of Rumbur (among its gāda bašāra) and the valley's most prestigious feast-giver, as well as being a recognized master of song composition. His wealthy family, of the Mutimire-nawau lineage (mentioned in Song A), also provided most of the asakāl 'headmen' of Rumbur over the last three generations. His song, as we shall see, honours his paternal cousin (FBS) Mashar, himself a renowned elder who pioneered Kalasha enfranchisement from feudal servitude as a political leader in the 1950s. Directly eulogised in the song is Mashar's father, Fauch, who was askāl of Rumbur in the 1920s and 30s (cf. Morgenstierne 1973: 170, photograph p. 260).

Let me first give a free translation of his song:

1. Fly away little bird, look and see, and come back!
2. At my birth a great prayer was made by the men of Rumbur:
3. That the bad times should go, to be exchanged for goodness and love
4. God accepted that prayer, having written it up in heaven
5. Uphold my advice and keep it close, for it will become gold and silver
6. Kids from one goat-pen appear alike, admirable to look at
7. Thinking these thoughts I went wandering, over the peaks and mountains
8. In the ridge between Dandili and Othak pastures, there I stalk markhor
9. Life is such (so rich) for my valley and my world
10. Now bravo to you my brother, who is a wise man's son!
11. Crossing Khondawish pass you came down to Chitral, that

golden bazaar
12 You sat yourself down there, petitioning over your father's troubles
13 This became famous news, the work of your father's doing
14 With that news the white butterfly army (of Muslims) fell to earth
15 Your purpose was fulfilled, and in death there was fame in the end
16 Now I look back at the world, and I wonder how times will pass

I should explain that, like all good poets, Buda here breaks some of the implicit rules of song composition that I outlined earlier. In fact, he creatively mixes two sub-genres of drazailak composition: those of contemplative verse, in the first 9 lines, followed by a true panegryic for his cousin marked with the formulaic 'Bravo!' of line 10. I should add that Buda further misleads his audience by using the characteristic opening verse for a love song (ašeki qrhu) in his first line, where the 'little bird' traditionally refers to a messenger between lovers!

Turning to the thematic content of his song, we can see that its first half (lines 1 to 9) is mainly self-reflective: in line 2, Buda recalls that his father had given a great sacrificial feast at his birth, where all the people of Rumbur gathered to pray for his long life; in line 4, he implies that their prayers on that occasion also resulted in the general welfare of Rumbur as a whole - its passage from evil to good times (line 3), which was achieved through his own family's political leadership. As an aged elder, he now advises his successors to follow his example (line 5) and to heed his precious words of advice. The remarks of line 6, on 'kids from one goat-pen appearing alike', contain a rather private allusion, as we shall see, but they are generally interpreted to mean that the grandsons of his family appear equal in glory to their forefathers (where his son is currently a dominant leader of the valley). In lines 8 to 9, Buda reflects on his good fortune, contemplating retirement in the mountan pastures

where he will hunt wild goats, concluding with some satisfaction about his life and times.

The second half of the song, from line 10, is directly addressed to Buda's paternal cousin Mashar, commemorating his father's successful petition in reclaiming lineage property encroached upon by Muslim neighbours in the 1920s. Following the characteristic poetic formula for such petitioning, he crosses over the mountain pass from Rumbur to Chitral, successfully pleading his case with the Mehtar so as to confound the 'white butterfly army' of Chitralis (in line 14). And finally (in line 15), Buda alludes to the great mortuary feast given on the death of Mashar's father, concluding with his hopes for the future of the Rumbur community. Indeed, by addressing a close agnate, Buda skillfully conveys a fair amount of self-glorification without overt boasting!

Well, I have given a synopsis of the overall meaning of this song; but I should point out that there are deeper and more personal allusions, also conveyed through formulaic phrases, which even a general Kalasha audience might miss. Taking just line 6, the verse about 'kids from one goat-pen becoming alike' or 'of one colour': this was widely interpreted as referring to the singer's lineage grandsons ('kid goats') being alike in virtue ('of one colour') to their ancestors; or, more literally, it was said to refer to Buda's own recent feast (a <u>sariek</u> dowry assembly) where he actually distributed kids of one colour to his daughters. But as the singer himself explained, the verse has a more private allusion for his family. In his words, "My son had taken a second wife, and I had long been angry about this; but now that he has children, I find my grandchildren equal in my eyes - like kid goats of one colour from one stable".

<u>Conclusions</u>

Much of my current research on Kalasha oral literature

concerns such ambiguities of meaning inherent in formulaic verse, comparing the 'intended' and 'received' meanings of singer and audience, which I believe illuminates how shared frameworks of interpretation emerge in non-literate cultures like that of the Kalasha. But apart from this cognitive interest, I hope to have indicated that Kalasha oral literature, particularly songs in the drazailak mode, is of far greater complexity and literary value than may be apparent without the background knowledge that informs it. Indeed, I would argue that it appears far more elaborate in semantic scope and poetic creativity than what we know of the verbal arts of any immediate neighbours of the Kalasha, among both Nuristani and Dardic speakers (eg. Morgenstierne 1967). In the scope of my twenty-minute presentation, I have sadly not been able to deal with the interesting metrical organization of Kalasha verse, or with styles of singing (see Handout III), which I believe may be of considerable historical interest in relation to what we know of early Indo-Aryan prosody. I hope that you may now allow me to answer some specific questions on this topic!

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